

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT TITLE II OF THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)

1. Q: Do we have to retrofit every existing municipal building in order to meet the accessibility requirements of the ADA?

A: No. Title II of the ADA requires that a public entity make its programs accessible to people with disabilities, not necessarily each facility or part of a facility. Program accessibility may be achieved by a number of methods. While in many situations providing access to facilities through structural methods, such as alteration of existing facilities and acquisition or construction of additional facilities, may be the most efficient method of providing program accessibility, the public entity may pursue alternatives to structural changes in order to achieve program accessibility. For example, where the second-floor office of a public welfare agency may be entered only by climbing a flight of stairs, an individual with a mobility impairment seeking information about welfare benefits can be served in an accessible ground floor location or in another accessible building. Similarly, a town may move a public hearing from an inaccessible building to a building that is readily accessible. When choosing among available methods of providing program accessibility, a public entity must give priority to those methods that offer services, programs, and activities in the most integrated setting appropriate.

2. Q: If we opt to make structural changes in providing program accessibility, are we required to follow a particular design standard in making those changes?

A: Yes. When making structural changes to achieve program accessibility, a public entity must make those changes in accordance with the standards for new construction and alterations. See question #5.

3. Q: What is the time line for making structural changes?

A: Any structural changes that are required to achieve program accessibility must be made by January 26, 1995. Each public entity with 50 or more employees was required to complete a transition plan by July 26, 1992, setting forth the steps necessary to complete the changes.

4. Q: Are there any limitations on the program accessibility requirement?

A: Yes. A public entity does not have to take any action that it can demonstrate would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of its program or activity or in undue financial and administrative burdens. This determination can only be made by the head of the public entity or his or her designee and must be accompanied by a written statement of the reasons for reaching that conclusion. The determination that undue burdens would result must be based on all resources available for use in the program. If an action would result in such an alteration or such burdens, the public entity must take any other action that would not result in such an alteration or such burdens but would nevertheless ensure that individuals with disabilities receive the benefits and services of the program or activity.

5. Q. What architectural design standard must we follow for new construction and alterations?

A: Public entities may choose from two design standards for new construction and alterations. They can choose either the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) or the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities (ADAAG). ADAAG is the standard that must be used for privately-owned public accommodations and commercial facilities under title III of the ADA. If ADAAG is chosen, however, public entities are not entitled to the elevator exemption (which permits certain privately-owned buildings under three stories or under 3,000 square feet per floor to be constructed without an elevator).

6. Q. Is the Federal Government planning to eliminate this choice and establish one design standard for new construction and alterations?

A. Yes. The Department of Justice is proposing to amend its current ADA Standards for Accessible Design (which incorporate ADAAG) to add sections dealing with judicial, legislative, and regulatory facilities, detention and correctional facilities, residential housing, and public rights-of-way. The proposed amendment would apply these Standards to new construction and alterations under title II. Under the proposed rule, the choice between ADAAG and UFAS would be eliminated.

7. Q: We want to make accessibility alterations to our city offices, which are located in a historic building listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Are we prohibited from making changes? Which rules apply to us? What if these alterations would destroy the historic nature of the building?

A: Alterations to historic properties must comply with the specific provisions governing historic properties in ADAAG or UFAS, to the maximum extent feasible. Under those provisions, alterations should be done in full compliance with the alterations standards for other types of buildings. However, if following the usual standards would threaten or destroy the historic significance of a feature of the building, alternative standards may be used. The decision to use alternative standards for that feature must be made in consultation with the appropriate historic advisory board designated in ADAAG or UFAS, and interested persons should be invited to participate in the decision making process.

The alternative requirements for historic buildings or facilities provide a minimal level of access. For example --

- 1) An accessible route is only required from one site access point (such as the parking lot).
- 2) A ramp may be steeper than is ordinarily permitted.
- 3) The accessible entrance does not need to be the one used by the general public.
- 4) Only one accessible toilet is required and it may be unisex.
- 5) Accessible routes are only required on the level of the accessible entrance.

8. Q: But what if complying with even these minimal alternative requirements will threaten or destroy the historic significance?

A: In such a case, which is rare, the public entity need not make the structural changes required by UFAS or ADAAG. If structural modifications that comply with UFAS or ADAAG cannot be undertaken, the Department's regulation requires that "program accessibility" be provided.

9. Q: Does a city have to provide curb ramps at every intersection on existing streets?

A: No. To promote both efficiency and accessibility, public entities may choose to construct curb ramps at every point where a pedestrian walkway intersects a curb, but they are not necessarily required to do so. Alternative routes to buildings that make use of existing curb cuts may be acceptable under the concept of program accessibility in the limited circumstances where individuals with disabilities need only travel a marginally longer route. In addition, the fundamental alteration and undue burden limitations may limit the number or curb ramps required.

To achieve or maintain program accessibility, it may be appropriate to establish an ongoing procedure for installing curb ramps upon request in areas frequented by individuals with disabilities as residents, employees, or visitors.

However, when streets, roads, or highways are newly built or altered, they must have ramps or sloped areas wherever there are curbs or other barriers to entry from a sidewalk or path.

Likewise, when new sidewalks or paths are built or are altered, they must contain curb ramps or sloped areas wherever they intersect with streets, roads, or highways. Resurfacing beyond normal maintenance is an alteration. Merely filling potholes is considered to be normal maintenance.

10. Q: Where a public library's open stacks are located on upper floors with no elevator access, does the library have to install a lift or an elevator?

A: No. As an alternative to installing a lift or elevator, library staff may retrieve books for patrons who use wheelchairs. Staff must be available to provide assistance during the operating hours of the library.

11. Q: Does a municipal performing arts center that provides inexpensive balcony seats and more expensive orchestra seats have to provide access to the balcony seats?

A: No. In lieu of providing accessible seating on the balcony level, the city can make a reasonable number of accessible orchestra-level seats available at the lower price of balcony seats.

12. Q: Is a city required to modify its policies whenever requested in order to accommodate individuals with disabilities?

A: No. A public entity must make only "reasonable modifications" in its policies, practices, or procedures to avoid discrimination. If the public entity can demonstrate that a modification would fundamentally alter the nature of its service, program, or activity, it is not required to make the modification.

For example, where a municipal zoning ordinance requires a set-back of 12 feet from the curb in the central business district and, in order to install a ramp to the front entrance of a pharmacy, the owner requests a variance to encroach on the set-back by three feet, granting the variance may be a reasonable modification of town policy.

On the other hand, where an individual with an environmental illness requests a public entity to adopt a policy prohibiting the use of perfume or other scented products by its employees who come into contact with the public, adopting such a policy is not considered a "reasonable" modification of the public entity's personnel policy.

13. Q: Does the requirement for effective communication mean that a city has to put all of its documents in Braille?

A: Braille is not a "required" format for all documents. A public entity must ensure that its communications with individuals with disabilities are as effective as communications with others.

A public entity is required to make available appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to ensure effective communication. Examples of auxiliary aids and services that benefit various individuals with vision impairments include magnifying lenses, qualified readers, taped texts, audio recordings, Brailled materials, large print materials, or assistance in locating items.

The type of auxiliary aid or service necessary to ensure effective communication will vary in accordance with the length and complexity of the communication involved.

For example, for individuals with vision impairments, employees can often provide oral directions or read written instructions. In many simple transactions, such as paying bills or filing applications, communications provided through such simple methods will be as effective as the communications provided to other individuals in similar transactions.

Many transactions, however, involve more complex or extensive communications than can be provided through such simple methods and may require the use of magnifying lenses, qualified readers, taped texts, audio recordings, Brailled materials, or large print materials.

14. Q: Must tax bills from public entities be available in Braille and/or large print? What about other documents?

A: Tax bills and other written communications provided by public entities are subject to the requirement for effective communication. Thus, where a public entity provides information in written form, it must, when requested, make that information available to individuals with vision impairments in a form that is usable by them. "Large print" versions of written documents may be produced on a copier with enlargement capacities. Brailled versions of documents produced by computers may be produced with a Braille printer, or audio tapes may be provided for individuals who are unable to read large print or do not use Braille. Brailled documents are not required if effective communication is provided by other means.

15. Q: Does a city have to arrange for a sign language interpreter every time staff members deal with people who are deaf or hard of hearing?

A: Sign language interpreters are not required for all dealings with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. A public entity is required to make available appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to ensure effective communication.

Examples of auxiliary aids and services that benefit individuals with hearing impairments include qualified interpreters, note takers, computer-aided transcription services, written materials, telephone handset amplifiers, assistive listening systems, telephones compatible with hearing aids, closed caption decoders, open and closed captioning, telecommunications devices for deaf persons (TDD's), videotext displays, and exchange of written notes.

The type of auxiliary aid or service necessary to ensure effective communication will vary in accordance with the length and complexity of the communication involved.

For example, employees can often communicate with individuals who have hearing impairments through written materials and exchange of written notes. In many simple transactions, such as paying bills or filing applications, communications provided through such simple methods will be as effective as the communications provided to other individuals in similar transactions.

Many transactions, however, involve more complex or extensive communications than can be provided through such simple methods and may require the use of qualified interpreters, assistive listening systems, videotext displays, or other aids or services.

16. Q: Do all city departments have to have TDD's to communicate with people who have hearing or speech impairments?

A: No. Public entities that communicate by telephone must provide equally effective communication to individuals with disabilities, including hearing and speech impairments. If telephone relay services, such as those required by title IV of the ADA, are available, these services generally may be used to meet this requirement.

Relay services involve a relay operator who uses both a standard telephone and a TDD to type the voice messages to the TDD user and read the TDD messages to the standard telephone user. Where such services are available, public employees must be instructed to accept and handle relayed calls in the normal course of business.

However, State and local agencies that provide emergency telephone services must provide "direct access" to individuals who rely on a TDD or computer modem for telephone communication. Telephone access through a third party or through a relay service does not satisfy the requirement for direct access.

17. Q: Are there any limitations on a public entity's obligation to provide effective communication?

A: Yes. This obligation does not require a public entity to take any action that it can demonstrate would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of its services, programs, or activities, or in undue financial and administrative burdens.

18. Q: Is there any money available to help local governments comply with the ADA?

A: Yes. Funding available through the Community Development Block Grant program at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development may be used for accessibility purposes, such as installation of ramps, curb cuts, wider doorways, wider parking spaces, and elevators. Units of local government that have specific questions concerning the use of CDBG funds for the removal of barriers should contact their local HUD Office of Community Planning and Development or call the Entitlement Communities Division at HUD, (202) 708-1577, for additional information.